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Leadership Taboos: Exploring Credibility

Leaders do many things others couldn't get away with and cannot understand. And each time a leader "gets away" with something, there's an erosion of credibility.

Leaders are charged with getting things done through others, so we allow them a great leeway. We expect our leaders to exert power, manipulate people and engage in political gamesmanship. We acknowledge their luxury perks and generous benefits. After all, most work extremely long hours. When they tout the merits of equality, collaboration and work-life balance, it's often a case of "do as I say, not as I do."

So, which leadership style is right for a given situation? A caring boss may be effective, but a forceful, demanding one sometimes gets the job done more expeditiously. An effective coach will help leaders focus on what they need to do to advance their agendas and help others realize their potential. But competing priorities often surface, forcing executive decisions that may be incongruent with traditionally held leadership theories.

It's difficult to be objective about a leader's personality and sort out the leadership process itself. This is another reason why good executive coaches earn their fees. They provide clarity about leadership paradoxes: the taboos people don't want to talk about.

In *The Taboos of Leadership*, Anthony D. Smith argues we need to examine leadership with a process-oriented approach. We need to talk about leadership taboos objectively — not as hot buttons to be avoided. Failure to tackle the subject leads to a loss of credibility and, ultimately, leadership failure.

Three Arenas of Leadership

We can view the leadership process from three critical vantage points: the arenas in which the leader intersects with followers, the organization and himself/herself.



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Each arena is replete with taboos — the paradoxical ideological standards we say we embrace, but on which we sometimes don't follow through. Whenever there's a discrepancy between theory and practice, there are taboos that aren't openly discussed. But without talking about them, we cannot fully assess their impact.

Let's look at three leadership taboos found in these arenas: persuasion, position and the person.

Taboos of Persuasion

Reaching one's intended goal requires influence and persuasion skills. Years ago, influence was largely a function of position. Today, we understand the process of leadership has veered away from strategies like positional power, authority, manipulation and coercion.

Influence happens when leaders use their credibility to make an impact on people and the conditions in which they work.

Six Ingredients for Credibility

Followers allow themselves to be influenced to the extent they view their leaders as credible. But leaders don't always gain credibility through enlightened means.

Credibility is achieved through:

- ▶ **1. Conviction:** The passion and commitment leaders demonstrate toward their vision
- ▶ **2. Character:** Consistent demonstration of integrity, honesty, respect and trust
- ▶ **3. Care:** Demonstration of concern for others' personal and professional well-being
- ▶ **4. Courage:** Willingness to stand up for one's beliefs, challenge others, admit mistakes and change one's own behavior when necessary
- ▶ **5. Composure:** Consistent display of appropriate emotional reactions, particularly in tough or crisis situations
- ▶ **6. Competence:** Proficiency in hard skills (technical, functional, content expertise) and soft skills (interpersonal relationships, communication, teamwork, organizational skills)

The taboos of persuasion reveal the gap between theory and practice. Organizational theorist Chris Argyris (1977)

labeled this phenomenon "theories in use" versus "espoused theories."

First, we're taught charisma shouldn't matter. In reality, highly effective leaders have great magnetism. Charisma, as an influence tactic, is extremely powerful. We don't like to admit we're drawn to those who have it (but we are), and leaders don't want to confess to cultivating it (but they do).

Second, some experts claim leaders should be open books, completely accessible and honest about their vulnerabilities. In reality, power, manipulation and political gamesmanship are critical to effective leadership; it's the way things get done.

Third, we've been taught that the knowledge economy has flattened hierarchies. Networking is key. Women are equal and may make better leaders than men. Are we more influenced by politically correct views of leadership than we realize?

Unless we talk about the taboos of persuasion, we cannot determine its impact and distinguish the positive from the negative.

Taboos of Position

In the knowledge economy, we theorize about dissolving the barriers among organizational levels. We talk about servant leadership and ask our leaders to be more humble, collaborative and communicative than the traditional figurehead in the top office. And yet, we adorn our leaders with the status and trappings of power and position. Their salaries exceed those of others by factors of 500 or more.

There's a fundamental dichotomy at work here. Leaders need to reduce their followers' degree of doubt. In a way, the intimidating trappings of position work to inspire awe and remove uncertainty.

And while we assert that leaders should be more collaborative and collegial, employees continue to send a different message: They want more direction, guidance and influence—not less.

Productive, competitive organizations are often characterized by strong, confident leadership. We may say leaders aren't supposed to have all the answers, but we expect them to act as though they know exactly where the organization should be going.

The Taboos of the Person

Few of us understand what it's like to be in the top leadership position. We don't know the responsibilities or pressures, and we cannot imagine the rewards and costs.

When facing the work-life balance conundrum, leaders are the least capable of finding the right balance — more so than any other person in the organization. Nonetheless, we expect them to be role models for their followers.

Leaders' perceived lack of balance is a major source of tension in today's organizations. Followers look to them to develop an understanding of the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Unfortunately, most leaders know no boundaries when it comes to the line between work and life.

We also believe leaders should be servants of the organization, putting aside their own needs for the greater good. Too often, however, leaders demonstrate behavior that's narcissistic, ego-driven or selfishly motivated.

The truth is, few people in any system—especially a capitalist one—are motivated to devote their talents and energy to the greater good at their own personal expense. It goes against human nature.

Leaders aren't motivated to reach the top because they want to be noble and worthy. They're trying to satisfy their urges for power, status and money. Do leaders understand the costs of craven self-interest before they act, or only after they encounter negative perceptions?

Most leaders are prone to act and achieve. They are not prone to self-reflection. It truly is lonely at the top. So, is being a leader worth it? When is enough, enough? We need to better recognize leadership's risk-reward ratio before we judge our leaders or decide to become one of them.

The Dark Side of Leadership

An effective leader is a contradictory collage of motivations and drivers, rewards and costs. We can't teach leadership the same way we've handled it for so many years. We can't look at leadership theories and say, "Do this, this and this, and you will become a good leader."

But we can understand leadership much better than we do now. If we take a look below the surface and talk about the taboos, we'll better understand the process.

The Credible Leader

Credibility is critical for leaders. If they're accused of demonstrating a poor work-life balance, people will doubt them. Each time there's a gap between what a leader says and does, credibility is undermined. Over time, it erodes followers' desire to be influenced.

Leaders are told they needn't have all the answers and should feel comfortable surrounding themselves with highly talented people. Leadership gurus tell us it's not important to be the smartest, most capable person in the room; rather, it's better to have the smartest, most capable team.

But leaders are rarely so self-confident that they'll allow others to see them as vulnerable or less capable. It just doesn't work that way.

Leadership is a process through which those at the top get the most out of people for a sustained period, no matter what it takes. A leader must take a stand on difficult topics and walk the talk.

As in all aspects of leadership, and even with the taboos we've discussed here, there's little room for cognitive dissonance or gaps between what leaders need and how they go about obtaining it.

Leadership, above all, is about credibility, which requires confidence, certainty and capability.

Here are two more taboos:

First, leaders are always supposed to walk the talk. But leaders are drawn to privilege and the trappings of status, and followers gain confidence in those who exhibit them. There's a conflict between what we expect from leaders as figureheads and what they — and we — actually want.

Second, organizations are supposed to be meritocracies, but favoritism still rules. Why do so many leaders put more emphasis on comfort and familiarity within their inner circle of key associates than on pure talent and performance?

Corporate Reality?

Several books and articles written over the last five years address the issues underlying corporate failures. In a 2002 Fortune piece, "Why Companies Fail," leadership experts Ram Charan and Jerry Useem say CEOs are sometimes too intimidating for employees to be truthful and that organizational cultures have a tendency to ignore, rather than confront, the brutal facts.

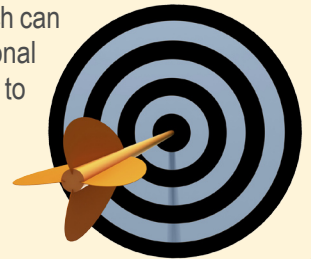
In their best-selling book *Confronting Reality* (2004), Larry Bossidy and Charan suggest many leaders are lost in self-perpetuating illusions, and they fail to confront real business issues. The book provides a model for facing internal and external corporate facts and explores how managers can successfully accomplish this.

A Harvard Business Review list of "Breakthrough Ideas for 2005" included a "Taboo on Taboos" — essentially a cry to acknowledge and deal with these unspoken gaps.

Acknowledging taboos is great, but it doesn't solve the problems. We fail to confront reality because we want to avoid the painful social anxiety we feel when breaking a taboo.

It's easy to read about companies that have made terrible strategic errors because they weren't able to face an obvious problem. But it's difficult—sometimes impossible—to stand up in a meeting or walk into your boss's office and speak up. Sometimes, we'd rather ignore the elephant in the room than risk the exposure or anxiety that accompanies a discussion of socially sensitive issues.

Executive coaching provides a good first step in addressing these taboos. It offers privacy and safety so individuals can talk about what's really going on and why taboos exist in the first place. An effective coach can also help you determine the source of the problem: Is it you? Is it your leader? Is it the organizational culture? With a coach, you can talk about the taboos that are holding you up, whether it turns out to be persuasion, position or person.



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